

THE TIMES

SE Features
 HD **The anxious generation Why our children are so stressed**
 BY Rachel Carlyle
 WC 2,673 words
 PD 14 March 2020
 SN The Times
 SC T
 ED 1; National
 PG 2,3
 LA English
 CY © Times Newspapers Limited 2020
 LP

They're worried about everything from coronavirus to exams and the future of the planet. Rachel Carlyle asked the experts what parents can do

It is no time to be an anxious child — or the parent of one — with anxiety-inducing news stories coming at us thick and fast. First climate change, then Brexit and now coronavirus are all heightening the anxiety epidemic already engulfing our children. And to cap it all, it's only a few weeks away from exams (that's if coronavirus doesn't deprive us of the pleasure).

TD

There seems to be no denying that anxiety is rising. The number of under-16s admitted to hospital for sleep disorders has almost doubled in six years, according to an analysis of NHS Digital data released this week, and almost one child in five has reported having nightmares about climate change, according to a survey of 2,000 8 to 16-year-olds. Official statistics published in 2018 show the percentage of 5 to 15-year-olds with anxiety or depression rose by 49 per cent between 2004 and 2017 that's 3.9 per cent to 5.8 per cent of children. "It's a striking increase," says Professor Cathy Creswell, an anxiety specialist at the University of Oxford and author of *Helping Your Child with Fears and Worries* (Robinson, £12.99).

She says that the news agenda scores highly on the classic criteria for causing anxiety: "A great deal of uncertainty, a lack of perceived control and the potential for threat." However, parents can help. "The most important thing is to show empathy, and stress there's nothing wrong with worrying. Parents can also prevent children from having a distorted sense of threat by giving them a chance to express their beliefs and gently correct any misinformation. They can help them develop a sense of perceived control, particularly in the case of coronavirus, by taking simple, practical steps."

Here's how to help your anxious child: How do I help my teenager with exam stress?

"Parents have the best intentions at this time of the year, but they often just want to tell children what to do," says Dr Carina Eriksen, a consultant psychologist. "Teenagers don't want our views on revision. Instead, ask them what they would like you to do to help them. What should you not do?"

If mock grades have been disappointing, ask them how they feel about their results. Get them coming up with solutions, then you can add to it so it's a collaborative approach."

Beware of piling on indirect pressure fuelled by our anxiety about the importance of good grades to access good universities and jobs. When they are anxious they will misread even mild comments such as "just do

your best". "Instead, they will hear 'be the best'," Eriksen says. "When they are stressed they are hyper-sensitive to any perceived criticism and hyper-vigilant of any hint of pressure. It's a minefield; sometimes it's better just to stay quiet and make them a hot chocolate."

When you see a child procrastinating it isn't laziness, it's anxiety. "It's a sign they cannot cope with the stress, although it's frustrating for parents. Ask them if they are happy with their revision and if not, how you can help?"

Say, 'I don't want you to be disappointed in August,' so it stays about them not you."

How do I talk to my child about coronavirus?

"You have to meet emotion with logic as reacting to someone's high emotion with even more emotion is only going to make everything feel more overwhelming," says Dr Angharad Rudkin, a clinical psychologist at the University of Southampton. "Stay factual, stay calm, don't make promises and don't dwell."

With younger children, it's about treading a line between giving just enough information and not dwelling on it. "They love having a solution to focus on — it empowers them and gives them a sense of control," says Dr Linda Papadopoulos, a psychologist and author. "So give them their own hand-sanitiser, encourage them to wash their hands often and to try not to touch their face. You can remind them that the virus doesn't seem to affect children. Then move on to another topic."

With older children aged 11-plus it's useful to talk about how society escalates fears, she says. Encourage them to interrogate the source of their news, which for teenagers almost exclusively comes from Snapchat. "It's basic, but they need to know the difference between news from the BMJ and someone's random blog on coronavirus," she adds.

d Should I be limiting their phone use?

Research so far seems to show a definite connection between anxiety and phone use; teenagers who are the heaviest users report the biggest mental health problems. In one study, 40 per cent of girls who spent more than five hours a day on social media showed symptoms of anxiety and depression. Yet no one can say for sure if phones cause anxiety or if anxious children are drawn to use their phones more, and other research has shown that 99.6 per cent of girls' mental health is not associated with technology.

Where parents can have the biggest impact is in banning phones from the bedroom at night to protect their child's sleep, which definitely does have an impact on anxiety. Research concludes that teenagers need about nine hours' sleep a night, but the average 15-year-old gets only 7.8 hours, and some teenagers markedly less. Experts suggest having family phone rules rather than singling out teenagers. That would mean no one's phones in the bedroom at night. Others might be: no phones at dinner and a phone drop zone when everyone comes in from work or school.

My teenager has trouble getting to sleep. How can I help?

They are not alone. Figures out this week revealed that 11,313 under-16s were admitted to hospital with a sleep disorder in 2018-9, almost double the number of six years previously. Late-night phone use is the clear culprit for teenagers' insomnia. A study at Glasgow University showed that teenagers who spend more than five hours a day on social media were 70 per cent more likely than average users to fall asleep late. Removing the phone from the bedroom is the obvious first step, if not an easy one. "When teenagers have phones in their bedrooms at night that causes disrupted sleep, which feeds anxiety. An event that would have been merely bothersome to a well-rested year 11 can set off a full-blown panic attack in a teenager who is exhausted, says the school psychologist Dr Lisa Damour, the author of *Under Pressure* (Atlantic, £14.99).

A bedtime routine can be helpful. According to a study at Rochester University in New York published in December, 14 to 17-year-olds got more sleep and reported fewer depressive thoughts when their parents set regular bedtimes, even though they only slept for an average of six minutes longer.

"Taking a bath helps, as do sleep-hygiene practices like making sure the bedroom is cold, spraying lavender on the pillow, and reading — girls often love making sleep into a ritual, although you will get pushback from boys," Godson says.

For a child who feels panicked at bedtime, Damour suggests a "square breathing" exercise, which sends a calming signal to the brain: inhale slowly for a count of three, hold that breath for a count of three, exhale slowly for another count of three, then pause for a count of three and repeat as necessary.

My son has become obsessed with the future of the planet and is having nightmares Teachers and psychiatrists report that eco-anxiety among children has grown massively in the past year; a survey this month by BBC Newsround 2,000 8 to 16-year-olds revealed that nearly one in five had had a nightmare about climate change, while 17 per cent said their sleeping and eating habits had been affected.

With anxiety, the best approach is to look at how rational the fear is, then work out what you can fix and what you can't and put those things into two boxes. "Get them to focus on what they can control in the here and now: carrying a reusable cup and straw, avoiding packaging, encouraging greener habits," Papadopoulos says. "Worrying about the things we cannot control will not do anything useful."

Suzi Godson, a psychologist and co-founder of the award-winning children's mental-health app MeeTwo, suggests getting an eco-anxious child to join or start a school or online campaigning group. "Feeling part of a group is the No 1 protector for mental- health problems as you have an identity — you are part of a tribe."

My clever year 11 child is disappointed with anything less than all grade 9s. How do I deal with this?

Society's approval of high grades and perfectionism makes it hard sometimes for parents even to see this as a problem.

Yet it is, Eriksen says, because it reveals a child's lack of self-confidence and risks burnout. "Sometimes it can be helpful for perfectionist children to educate them on the fact that if they work too hard they may burn out and that will affect their academic performance in these exams and beyond, at A levels or university. Point out that they need to trust their abilities more and prioritise self-care and stress management as much as revision," Eriksen says. "They need to be taking physical exercise, eating regularly, getting enough sleep and taking proper breaks."

GCSEs, particularly, are a long game. Most children have a punishing schedule of at least 20 exams spread over six to eight weeks, which puts them in an "adrenaline-filled brace position for two months", which is unhealthy, as Jenny Brown, the head teacher at the City of London Girls' School, pointed out this week. Parents must insist that perfectionist children take breaks and whole days off during that time, however much their stressed offspring may feel that this is just a waste of time.

It's also important to shift their mindset on "failure". "Young people learn most by observing, so role-model calm behaviour where failures are tolerated and laughed at rather than catastrophised," Rudkin advises. "Help your child to rationalise what failure really is, and to accept that there is no such thing as perfection. We grow through mistakes and challenges, which builds up resilience."

The problem is that young people are under so much pressure to be exceptional, she points out. "Average is a dirty word these days, which is desperately sad as, by definition, most of us are average."

My daughter's best friend has just broken up with her — it's like a bereavement Parents often underestimate the importance of friendship break-ups to children. In fact, psychologists say it is similar to a bereavement or divorce. "We can't overestimate the terror of a child going into school not knowing who they are going to sit with," says Tanith Carey, the author of *The Friendship Maze* (Vie, £10.99). "So don't dismiss it with, 'Oh, I never liked her anyway,' or try to move it on too quickly. Really listen without making comments until the child can process all those feelings. It's hard, as we are so hurt on behalf of our child that we instantly want to make them better by saying, 'You were too good for her anyway.' But say nothing. Once they have offloaded those feelings, help them get some perspective. Like snakes shedding skins, children shed identities and friends as their interests change. So although the feeling of rejection seems deeply personal now, it's probably more a case of one group moving on and your child falling by the wayside. Explaining this to them can help calm the anxiety.

"Children learn whether they are likeable from their parents, so in this transition time before finding new friends it's important to spend time with them and show them we like them and value their company. Don't let them ruminate in their rooms where they will be following their former friends on social media." Dig out friends from old schools, or from activities outside school. "Encourage a growth mindset about friends: it's not the end of the line you can go out and make new friends and learn new social skills at the same time."

My daughter is obsessed with the size of her nose. It is a completely normal nose, so how can I reassure her?

"Body image is so linked to self-esteem and happiness that when children say I feel fat, or ugly, or my nose is too big, it is another way of saying I feel sad," says Papadopoulos. They fixate on one body part or their weight as something to pin their unhappiness on. "Their thinking is, if only my skin cleared up then I'd get the girl and if I got the girl I would be more popular — and so on.

"If there's a genuine issue with weight, or their skin or nose, by all means think practically and talk about how you can support them. Define the problem and look at solutions. But it's also important to encourage them to look at the jumps they are making: I don't like my nose therefore I am completely unhappy. So do you think the happiest people on earth have the best noses?

Ask them, is that logical?

Let's try to break the reasoning down. Are you overestimating the impact that a nose or good legs or a skinny body can have on life, unless you plan to be a model?" Parents shouldn't be afraid to sound like a broken record by repeating that body image is not the only contributor to self-esteem, she says. "When people used to say to my daughter, 'Oh you're so pretty', I would say, 'Yes, and she's pretty good at maths and kickboxing too.' I would always try to remind her it was by no means the most important thing about her. That needs to be the background noise for them."

How can I get my teenager to open up?

He just says, 'I'm fine,' and shuts me out. Any strategies?

"When they say, 'I'm fine,' it's often not that they are shutting you out but trying to protect you," Godson says. "We see this on the MeeTwo app all the time: teenagers withhold telling therapists and parents about their anxieties because they are programmed to say what they think people want to hear. They don't want to upset their parents, particularly if they perceive that the parents are vulnerable — if they are going through a divorce or are overwhelmed at work, for example."

She says parents need to give anxious children explicit permission to lay the worst at their door. "Reassure the child that they can tell you anything — you've seen or heard it all before. Let them know nothing is off limits and you can work anything out. If you create a way in and make it clear there will be no judgment, only support, they will open up. All the evidence we have is that as soon as a child opens up about their anxiety they feel better. When they do talk, no matter how freaked out you are on the inside, you have to not show it: be cool, be pragmatic and figure out ways to fix or support or change whatever is required."

40% 11,000

When it comes to exams, don't tell them to 'just do your best'. They will hear 'be the best'

NS gsars : SARS/MERS Viruses | gout : Outbreaks/Epidemics | gparen : Parenting/Parenthood | grelad : Relationships | gcat : Political/General News | gcold : Respiratory Tract Diseases | ghea : Health | glife : Living/Lifestyle | gmed : Medical Conditions | gspox : Infectious Diseases

RE uk : United Kingdom | eurz : Europe | weurz : Western Europe

PUB News UK & Ireland Limited

AN Document T000000020200314eg3e000k2

Search Summary

Text	"Teachers and psychiatrists report that eco-anxiety among children has grown massively in the past year; "
Date	All Dates
Source	All Sources
Author	All Authors
Company	All Companies
Subject	All Subjects

Industry	All Industries
Region	All Regions
Language	English
Results Found	2
Timestamp	5 May 2023 1:51 PM